

Seattle City Hall

Seattle Planning Commissioners: Steve Sheedy, Martin Kaplan, Jerry Finrow, Valerie Kinast and Mimi Sheridan

Facilitator: Jim Metz, DPD

Note Taker: Katie Sheehy, DPD

Attendees: Participants from the small group focus meetings plus other interested parties.

Planning Commission Comments

(Reflections of what was discussed in the small groups)

Martin Kaplan

- There are a lot of engaged community/neighborhood groups, but they don't have "teeth" to really influence how projects actually get built.
 - For example, there are sites in Uptown that are being underdeveloped (because of market conditions, townhouses can be easier to build than condos).
 - Design is difficult to legislate and it would be nice for community groups to have more of an influence about what gets built, maybe by reducing thresholds for Design Review.
- We need to get families back into the City – not just young professionals and empty nesters. It's sort of a chicken and egg situation though...do we need to improve services to attract these people, or do these populations need to increase before we can provide the services?
 - School quality is also a concern for many people with children, who often move to the suburbs because our public school system is not as good.

Jerry Finrow

- The code works pretty well but much of the design for new projects does not fit within the neighborhood context. Quality of the projects is typically OK.
- Increased density is acceptable to most communities, but design needs to be improved so that it fits within neighborhood character – more design guidelines or increased design review might help
- Challenge of affordable housing linked to housing supply. Do we need to increase the amount of land that is zoned multifamily? The supply of multifamily zoning is limited, which could contribute to high housing costs.
- Parking – it might be beneficial to do away with requirements or manage them differently.
- Encourage public benefits concurrently with increased density.
- Design review is OK but fails sometimes. A comprehensive review is needed the design review is needed to improve the process.

- Annual design awards could be given out by the City to highlight good multifamily projects and might be a way to improve overall design quality.
- The land use code is complex for a reason and it might not be in our best interest to change that – we don't want to forget embedded values in current code.
- Daylight access, especially for streets, is very important.
- Maximization of density potential – we need to strengthen requirements for density because a lot of projects build lower than allowable densities.
- High costs of condo insurance – structural requirements of condos increase insurance costs which makes it more beneficial for developers to build townhouses.

Valerie Kinast

- The Land Use Code is not too complex – neighborhoods are unique and people have different housing needs.
- We need clear guiding principals that will guide revisions of the code.
- Design is very important
- Design review is important and the process should be reviewed.

Mimi Sheridan

- How projects fit into neighborhood is very important and goes beyond just the building envelope examples include...
 - height, but it is often not most important;
 - creativity;
 - transitions between zones;
 - parking;
 - good developers and architecture help, but not all of them are good.
- Design review is important
 - need everyone within the process to be really good.
 - Increase training for staff and board members
- Existing housing (which is affordable) is often torn down for more condos
 - how can existing housing be supported by code?
 - need a range of options
 - people like townhouses
 - problems with balance of demand for student housing in University District and neighborhood.
 - range of housing options for families.

Q & A – Discussion

Architect – zoning by its nature creates areas of different heights. Design review process often makes it difficult to get buildings that transition well between zones. Buildings that support better transitions between zones could fit with nature of zoning but we need to make changes to the code for that to happen.

Harbor Properties. Design review – we need to get rid of modulation requirements; allow more unique shops (avoid cookie cutter) and increase compatibility with surrounding neighborhood. Modulation requirements make it difficult to design good floor plans.

We need to increase flexibility within the land use code. There is a lack of negotiation about setbacks, modulation, etc. We need to increase flexibility within code. We also see departures in design review that sometimes are against wishes of neighborhood. Need increased opportunity for community input. Flexibility goes both ways.

CNC – The height difference between neighborhood commercial and single family zoning is significant. We need increased flexibility that respects uniqueness of location. All lots do not offer the same development potential. Other important considerations:

- ecology of trees and daylight
- all infill lots are not equal and should not be treated as such
- might change market but could increase uniqueness
- incorporate forethought about future changes.

Are lessons learned from neighborhood business district strategy process being applied regarding good design? Maybe a point system for design review could be used and create a discount for developers that have good projects so they might have to go through fewer meetings. Better design → fewer meetings. Worse design → more meetings.

The projects shown as being illustrative of what gets built in multifamily zones are really destructive to residential neighborhoods. We need to increase creativity and diversity for what gets built – row houses, cottage housing – improve street presence and have fewer buildings that turn their back on the street. There are a lot of good examples in the older neighborhoods on the East coast – townhouses/row houses with porches that are still higher density and also have yards. I see more of a tendency to experiment in single family areas rather than multifamily. For example, cottage housing should be allowed in L1-L3 zones rather than single family.

Question for Mimi – what other types of housing do you envision?

Mimi –

- Row houses, flats with 3 bedrooms, increased variety in size of multifamily buildings;
- There is a project in Fremont with a garden court that is more like single family houses than many multifamily ones;

- Vancouver B.C. – lots of 3- or 4-story buildings around a courtyard with large decks, other amenities.

In design review we hear a lot of people asking “why not like Hawthorn Village”? Many of the buildings from the 1920s work really well in neighborhoods.

Mimi – Again, modulation is an issue – old buildings didn’t have modulation, but they do have windows with sills, brick, terra cotta, but no modulation. The quality of materials is important for tradeoffs. Different design review boards are more or less strict.

Steve – Why don’t more developers use brick or other more traditional materials?

Because it costs \$20.00 per square foot.

Mimi – We need to allow more trade offs – increased height limits or reduced parking requirements in exchange for better materials.

Other materials could work, but there is no guarantee, as a developer, that you are going to get that trade off. For example, at the Press in Capitol Hill, we had to put decks back on to meet the modulation requirements. We need examples of options so that with increased flexibility we also have certainty about what tradeoffs will be accepted.

Real Estate Appraiser – neighborhoods impacted by neighborhood commercial zoning with transitional use, for example affordable housing that is dilapidated – doesn’t make sense to pump money in if it is going to be torn down. Lots of tacky neighborhoods have neglected single family houses.

The cost of condo insurance results in lower density in L3 and L4. The cost of land also plays a roll in high housing costs. It also makes it difficult to assemble enough to do row houses; we can only do spot development. Value drives what were seeing regardless of zoning; price isn’t going to come down. Three bedroom units require three times the amount of parking, so most will do a two-bedroom unit with a den instead.

Existing height limits, and the way it’s measured encourages flat roofs. Maybe we could use a system of height averaging that could increase variety and allow something other than just flat roofs.

Jim Metz – is affordable housing non-profit and government turf?

To see developer’s numbers about how much projects cost was eye opening – what is it about design that discourages people from building pure, simple, functional and cheap buildings?

Mimi – Design doesn’t drive cost; land, etc. does. People just hold land and let property deteriorate to sell later. Not just deteriorating but it costs a lot to update older buildings to current standards. New construction is more expensive and the existing housing stock

is affordable. It pencils to build townhouses – it's driven by the market. Only way to preserve old is to allow infill on some lots – save old houses and build behind them.

University District Representative - Our neighborhood plan voluntarily up-zoned to 85'. But we still have concern about transitions. We support increased density, if other services are also provided. We see lots of parking lots held in parking trusts and lots of poor quality rooming housing with too few parking spaces. The buildings are poorly design too. The City needs to examine what allows these to be built.

The land use code always has unintended consequences.

Why regulate open space (decks) rather than allowing that to be market-driven? Is it necessary?

Mimi – there were complaints about the previous code that people in apartments should have some open space – how much and how big percentage? Numbers seem to dictate...courtyards. People don't want to give up space.

Decks don't always make sense – high rise buildings can be too windy to use.

Mimi – There have been proposed changes that would allow indoor space to count towards open space but it would not be visible to neighbors.

There was not an open space requirement prior to 1982 – what is valuable for tenants? The intent of requiring open space was for the benefit of tenants. What should it be used for? Commercial code changes addressed this issue somewhat. Design review has authority to reduce open space requirements but outcomes are often too unknown...should be fast track to address open space because it's a key component of multifamily buildings and requirements.

Balcony requirements should also be reviewed for community continuity. Some people would like to discourage them because they are just used for bike storage.

When I sat through design review, I thought “who is going to use such a small balcony” but I learned that people do need them. Who deserves the open space? People who live in studios really need that space. It is a social obligation that doesn't get reflected in the code...these buildings will last a long time. We need to care that we're doing this for the long hall...put yourself in a studio and think of how important it would be to have a balcony.

We've done studies that show people would rather have more enclosed space than decks. We try to balance what people can afford and what they want. We build a variety of units for different people's needs.

Mimi - We might need to review the principles for why we have open space requirements.

Original comprehensive plan goals include requirements about the amount of open space per person.

Mimi – In lieu of providing more open space we are providing money for parks.

We've heard that from Pike/Pine neighborhood. Do you use your deck or go out on the street? My daughter lives in a 150 square foot apartment and spends time outside and around her neighborhood. Great streets and other places to socialize are also used instead of open space.

In Philadelphia we had to walk around people barbequing on the street...maybe group decks could meet that need.

Jerry – Increased density needs to be accompanied by increased public benefits. The City government has a Parks Department silo, a school district silo. We need to look across silos and plan parks and open space with more coordination so that we can build a rich city. Lots of rules are rigid and the code needs to be rewritten. We need to think how city works and see the multifamily code within broader context – zoning won't do it by itself. Zoning tries to accomplish things third hand rather than more directly and working within the community.